

# ***Nepalese Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management***

[The Double-blind, Peer-reviewed Journal of Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management]

Vol. 3, No. 1


March 2022

*Editorial*

## **Endemicisation of COVID-19:**

### *Will it Salvage the Hospitality and Tourism Industry?*

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The proposition of 'endemicisation' of COVID-19 is being mooted so that the hospitality and tourism industry that has borne the brunt of the pandemic could be salvaged and compensate for the damage. There are arguments for and against the 'endemicisation' bid that is making rounds among the policy makers and stakeholders of this industry.

#### **'Pandemicisation' vs 'Endemicisation'**

COVID-19 has been with us for the last two years. In wake of its outbreak in Wuhan of China in December 2019, the coronavirus disease soon gripped several parts of the world at an alarming rate and was declared a pandemic by March 2020 in most of the countries including Nepal. So did start the pandemicisation of COVID-19 across the globe.

Veritably as a pandemic, the coronavirus disease killed millions of people. The accumulated death toll was highest in the USA, India, and Brazil, followed by the UK, Spain, Russia and Iran (worldometer, 2022). Amid the unprecedented global health, social and economic emergency due to the pandemic, travel and tourism industry is among the most affected sectors with aeroplanes on the ground, hotels closed, and travel restrictions put in place in virtually all countries around the world (WHO, 2022a).

The disease has not shown any signs of going away. Instead, the coronavirus is becoming powerful by manifesting itself in different variants, Omicron being the latest one. Since the 'more communicable' Omicron variant was discovered as less deadly than the earlier ones, several countries including the UK, Spain, Ireland, and South Africa are treating the disease as endemic. This is called flu-isation.

In their eyes, COVID-19 is like the flu, tuberculosis (TB) or HIV-AIDS. When the WHO accepts this, no records of COVID-19 in terms of infections or deaths will be kept and there will be no restrictions. Whenever a person catches the disease, s/he will be treated just as in the case of other diseases. It is likely to create a different scenario.

Since the tourism and hospitality industry typically involves human movements and physical interfaces in terms of travels, trekking, lodging, food-and-beverage activities, and the like, it has been hardest hit by the pandemic-driven lockdowns and other operational restrictions (Sthapit, 2020; Sthapit, 2020 December; Sthapit, 2021 March; Sthapit, 2021 June). UNWTO reports that from 2020 to 2021, international tourist arrivals fell by 1 billion, and US\$ 1.3 trillion in total export revenues from international tourism was lost, and 100 million direct tourism jobs are now at risk UNWTO (2022b). In addition, it has put at risk the sectors associated with tourism such as labour-intensive accommodation and food services industries that provide employment for 144 million workers worldwide. Small businesses, which shoulder 80 percent of global tourism, are particularly vulnerable.

Now, two years into the pandemic, weary governments of countries around the world are hoping the 'fast-spreading but less severe' omicron variant marks a turning point, a shift towards a more predictable and manageable phase (Bloomberg, 2022 January 19). Discussions on the endemisation or flu-isation of COVID-19 are going on in Europe and are likely to grip the Asian continent also. Many argue that endemisation can be instrumental in salvaging the hospitality and tourism businesses that have been hardest hit by the pandemic, as the lifting or relaxing of the restrictions of various sorts (including the travel restrictions) can help bring normalcy to the hospitality and tourism sector. It will, they argue, revive the ailing industry sooner. Yet, it is not likely to be forthcoming so easily.

### **Need for Critical Assessment**

Relaxing the rules on abiding by basic health and safety protocols in the name of endemisation may, however, put the tourism and hospitality sector in jeopardy. Endemisation could bring a short-term relief to the industry, but it can be detrimental in the long term, and cannot be sustainable.

In late January 2022 alone, COVID was taking almost 64,000 lives a week globally. Learning to live with the virus should not mean enduring that much death, WHO Director-General Tedros A. Ghebreyesus said (WHO, 2022). Endemisation will not be a sustainable move for now, even though a few countries started considering this disease as endemic at different points in time, based on their levels of immunity.

The proposition to treat COVID-19 as an endemic disease, like seasonal flu, is just premature, say WHO experts (Bloomberg, 2022 Jan 19). With Omicron ripping through populations and vast parts of the planet still unvaccinated, the pandemic is not over. Hence, the bottom line is the path to reaching that endemic stage is full of uncertainties, posing tough questions for policymakers everywhere. Instead of yearning for a 'post-COVID' spell, 'learning with coronavirus' should be the need of the hour. There is an imperative need to make a critical assessment of the pros and cons of endemising COVID-19 before formulating and implementing any plan and policy.

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